DRAFT
The Biretta Belt: Origins and Definitions
By Richard J. Mammana

George Will's syndicated column noted on the sesquicentenary of the John Keble's Assize Sermon—reckoned as the beginning of the Oxford Movement—that "today some Episcopalians refer to the Middle West, sometimes derisively, as 'the biretta belt,' a biretta being a small four-sided cap."[1] The appearance of the term Biretta Belt in popular journalism in 1983 is some indication of its widespread acceptance as a name for an informal American religious region. But when and how did its use begin? What precisely did it describe?

Specialized Episcopal Church dictionaries are fairly consistent in terms of the basic definition as a region of dioceses with significant Anglo-Catholic character, though by 2000 it is considered inelegant and out of date in a standard work:

> Slang expression for dioceses in the vicinity of the Great Lakes that were once considered to be characterized by Anglo-catholic practices. The term is derived from the traditional fondness of some Anglo-catholic clergy for wearing birettas. Use of this hat was considered by some to be an emblem of Anglo-catholicism. The term is dated and imprecise because few dioceses in this region are now characterized by distinctive Anglo-catholic practice. It is also misleading because Anglo-catholicism cannot be equated with the use of a biretta.[2]

The metaphor is expanded and perhaps even tortured in the description of Chicago as "the jewel in the Biretta Belt,"[3] or "the pom-pom of the Biretta Belt."[4] It is never used to describe the informal network of Anglo-Catholic metropolitan "shrine churches" in the Boston-Washington corridor.

An examination of sources suggests that by 1931 the term was already considered dated. The Reverend J.G.H. Barry (1858-1931), rector of St. Mary the Virgin, New York from 1909 to 1928, writes in his memoirs:

> I suppose that the illusion still exists that a group of dioceses in the Middle West are Catholic. The belt would comprise the dioceses of the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana. None of these dioceses were Catholic if by a Catholic diocese was meant one in which a majority of the clergy and laity profess and practice the Catholic faith. If by a Catholic diocese we mean one with a sufficient number of Catholic clergy to secure the election of a Catholic bishop—that is another matter.[5]

With this geographical definition, we have the term identified as the dioceses of Chicago, Eau Claire (erected 1928), Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Northern Indiana (formerly Michigan City), Quincy (1877-2013), and Springfield, all in Province V of the Episcopal Church. (The Diocese

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[1] E.g. in *The Morning Call* (Allentown, Pennsylvania), July 14, 1983, p. 10.
[2] Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-friendly Reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), p. 47.
[3] Jacqueline Schmitt in *The Witness*, Vol. 80 (1997), p. 21.
[4] *Pastoral Music*, Vol. 14 (1989), p. 13.
[5] Joseph Gayle Hurd Barry, *Impressions and Opinions: An Autobiography* (New York: E.S. Gorham, 1931) ch. 11.

of Indianapolis, which covers the southern two-thirds of Indiana, is usually not included.) During the periods in review, ordination training centered on Nashotah House Theological Seminary in rural Wisconsin, founded in 1847 as a self-consciously Tractarian—and later Ritualist—institution. Other regional seminaries, including the Seabury Divinity School at Faribault, Minnesota (1858-1933) and the Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois (1883-1933) participated in this ethos as well to a less articulated or "extreme" degree. The dioceses are also a notable cluster in that they are all named during the period in question for see cities rather than for states in a local adaptation of what was known in the late nineteenth-century Episcopal Church as the "see principle." Neighboring dioceses, by contrast, are named for governmental toponyms: Ohio, Southern Ohio, Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Missouri, etc.

Still further research about the collective description of these dioceses reveals that they were originally referred to as "the troublesome belt" by the Right Reverend George William Peterkin (1841-1916, diocesan bishop of West Virginia 1878-1916) at some time before the General Convention of 1901.[6] This usage continues in letters to the editor in *The Living Church*,[7] and in a 1921 note by the Jesuit weekly *America* about a supposed end of Anglo-Catholicism in the Episcopal Church:

> Now the troublesome belt has ceased to trouble and the weary are at rest, reposing on the line of least resistance and aiming an occasional dart at Rome as an apology for their own existence.[8]

It is unclear when the Troublesome Belt became the Biretta Belt, but the term is nearly always retrospective, describing a former time and previous practice: in 1969, as in 1931 and in 1921, "There is no longer a clearly signposted Biretta Belt."[9] It is also exported to England to describe a section of South Yorkshire where the patronage of Charles Lindley Wood, Viscount Halifax (1839-1934) had influence.[10] Another hypothetical Biretta Belt is in southeastern England, where the "London, Brighton and South Coast Religion" held sway during the early lifetime of Barbara Pym (1913-1980).[11] It is still also used to refer to the religious culture of missions in northeastern Australia (especially the Diocese of Carpentaria), the Torres Strait, and Papua New Guinea.[12] Anecdotally, the division of African mission areas into arrangements of comity among the Church Missionary Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the Universities' Mission to Central Africa also resulted in an identifiable Biretta Belt in missions connected to the latter two organizations.[13]

It is noteworthy that as a religious-geographical description, Biretta Belt(s) precede the more current and recognizable "Bible Belt," coined by H.L. Mencken in 1925 to describe a section of the American South (in the immediate instance, he was describing Jackson,

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[6] *The San Francisco Call*, October 3, 1901, p. 5
[7] E.g. by Joseph Rushton, May 24, 1913, p. 135.
[8] J.A.M. Richey, "Decline of the Catholic Party" in *America*, May 14, 1921, p. 82.
[9] *The Month*, 1969, p. 185.
[10] Allan Mallinson in *The Spectator*, 2004.
[11] Hazel K. Bell, *No Soft Incense: Barbara Pym and the Church* (London: Barbara Pym Society, 2004), p. 26.
[12] *Pacific Studies*, Volume 21, Issue 4, p. 12.
[13] Charles Hugh Egerton Smyth, *Church and Parish: Studies in Church Problems, Illustrated from the Parochial History of St. Margaret's, Westminster* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1955), p. 137.

Mississippi) characterized by attitudes of social and hermeneutical conservatism among Protestant Caucasian Americans.[14] Other "belt" designations proliferated after the popularization of what was originally called the "Bible and Lynching Belt" and "Bible and Hookworm Belt" by Mencken: Banana, Bison, Borscht, Corn, Cotton, Frost, Jell-O, Rust, Salt, Snow, Stroke, Sun, Unchurched. The earliest such Belt is now the one with the least cultural currency.

[14] See Stanley D. Brunn, Gerald R. Webster and J. Clark Archer, "The Bible Belt in a Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles," in *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 2011, pp. 513-549.